

# THE REVIEW AND EXPOSITOR

---

Vol. XIV.

October, 1917

No. 4

---

## LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE CHURCH.

By PROFESSOR W. W. BARNES, TH.D., FORT WORTH, TEXAS.

During the Middle Ages the local idea of the Church was practically lost or forgotten. It was overshadowed by the universal idea. But this universal idea was made up of two ideas distinct and almost mutually exclusive. One of these may be called the ecclesiastical or political conception of the Church. According to this view, the Church was visible and indivisible. This had come down from the early centuries. Soon after the death of the last of the Apostles men began to search after some method by which the Church could express its united opinion. This opinion, when found, would be infallible. So long as the Christians were persecuted by the pagans no method could be found. But when the government of Constantine became favorably disposed toward Christianity, almost at once the growing Church consciousness found opportunity to express itself. The occasion was the Arian controversy. But the Bishops of Nicea did far more than condemn Arianism. "The Nicene Council might not at once disclose all its significance to its contemporaries and to those who took part in it. That is common in the case of great events; the actors are occupied with the details and the temporary forces. But the first general council

crystallized and embodied in a new form the idea of the Church; it exhibited the form in which, as regards faith and duty, the Church could appear, and speak, and act in time and space. A presence heretofore believed, shall we say worshipped? found means of gathering itself into a tangible shape, in a Bithynian town, during some weeks of the autumn of 325."\* This newly discovered visible organization continued to express itself through general councils, but gradually through the centuries the Bishop of Rome came to be the authoritative spokesman of it. Through the labors of the Roman ecclesiastical jurists the visible Church became a political organization, a hierarchical state, whose king was the Bishop of Rome, claiming jurisdiction over all earthly potentates, temporal as well as spiritual.

The other Mediæval conception of the Church of Christ may be called the spiritual. Instead of the Church's being a visible organization composed of members bound together by mutual ties, the Church was composed of those enjoying real but unseen fellowship with God in Christ. This conception was the source of the best religious life of the Middle Ages. "It was the garden in which bloomed the flowers of mediæval mystical devotion."

The Schoolmen of the thirteenth century in their efforts to harmonize these two ideas of the Church evolved almost a third. In the first of the two mentioned, fellowship of the members with one another was the dominant note; in the second, fellowship with God in Christ prevailed. The Schoolmen taught that the Church is a visible organization, the heart of which is the priesthood, through which as a channel God's grace comes into the lives of the members. By the opening of the sixteenth century this idea prevailed with the mass of the people throughout western Europe. The Church was regarded as a saving institution, an institution through whose priesthood and through this alone, the saving grace of

---

\*Rainy: *The Ancient Cath. Church*, p. 333.

God was administered. The authoritative spokesman in this institution was God's Vicar on earth, the Bishop of Rome.†

There was another religious movement of the later Middle Ages which has received little attention in our histories. It was the spread of a non-ecclesiastical religion. This found its beginning and its impetus in the spiritual conception of the Church mentioned above. Evidence of this movement is seen in the ecclesiastical legislation of the German towns and States and in the religious life of many persons of the time. "It has always been recognized that Luther's father was a man of a deeply religious turn of mind, although he commonly despised the clergy, and thought that most monks were rogues or fools; but what is not recognized is that in this he represented thousands of quiet and pious Germans in all classes of society."\*\* The Brethren of the Common Life, the Praying Circles of Mystics, the *Unitas Fratrum* and other religious confraternities gathered some of this non-ecclesiastical religious life into more or less organized forms. When the printing-press was invented they quickly made use of it to disseminate their hymns, prayers and other devotional literature. Luther has left on record his debt to one of their devotional books, *Die Deutsche Theologie*.

"Such was the religious atmosphere into which Luther was born and which he breathed from his earliest days. Every element seems to have shared in creating and shaping his religious history."\*\*\* Although his father's sympathies were with the mystical, non-ecclesiastical type of religion, the boy imbibed the principal political and ecclesiastical ideas of the German working-class. The Emperor was God's earthly ruler and the Church was the "Pope's house" in which the Pope was the "house-fath-

†Lindsay: *A History of the Reformation*, II, p. 480ff.

\*Lindsay: *Op. cit.* I, p. 139f.

\*\*Lindsay: *Op. cit.* I, p. 157.

er." Even as a child he was one of those souls from whom the unseen world is thinly separated. His father desired to give him as good an education as the times afforded. He was prepared for the University of Erfurt, but before he finished his university course he entered the Erfurt Convent of the Augustinian Eremites. The most famous teacher of theology in the convent at the time was John of Paltz, a devotee of papal absolutism. He retired from teaching a short time after Luther entered the convent. If he was not Luther's teacher of theology, his teachings were continued by his successor John Nathin, and Luther imbibed the absolutist ideas. But Luther did not enter the convent to study theology; he went there to find peace with God. He followed punctiliously the round of monastic duties and self-tortures. He gained for himself in the convent of Erfurt and in the other convents of the order throughout Germany the reputation of being a very pious young man because of his devotion to the monastic rule, but he found no peace. Staupitz, the Vicar-General of the Order, directed him toward faith in God for justification and he found peace. But his attitude toward the external ecclesiastical system with which he was connected did not change. The Bishop of Rome was still the "house-father" in the Church and he accepted the Roman system in toto—mass, relics, indulgences, etc.

A visit to Rome on business of the Order in 1511 left in Luther's soul seed that were to germinate less than a decade later. He was not conscious of this at the time. The sentiment and glamour which surrounded the Holy city blinded him to the shameful immorality and unbelief current there, but when the famous (?) Tetzl began to cry his wares almost within hearing of Wittenberg, Luther remembered how the money wrung from the religious German peasant was squandered in Rome in ways unnamable. This remembrance drove him to oppose the practice of indulgences and led him on to doubt the doc-

trinal basis. But in contending against the usurpations of the Bishop of Rome and the consequent corruptions, he did not give up the doctrine of the visible Catholic (Universal) Church of Christ. He could not wholly give up the inheritance from the Middle Ages. He fought the ecclesiastical State that the Roman canonists had built up around the Bishop of Rome, but he held firmly to the idea of the community of believers in Christ. In his Greater Catechism he says: "The Creed calls the holy Christian Church *Communione Sanctorum*, a communion (*Gemeinschaft*) of saints. . . . In good German and our mother tongue it should be translated a Christian community (*Gemeine*) or congregation. So likewise the word *Communio*, which is attached to it, should not be translated *communion* (*Gemeinschaft*), but *community* (*Gemeine*). . . . Those who did not know Latin or German turned it into *Communion* (*Gemeinschaft*) of saints, although no German would use such an expression or understand it. But to speak plain German, we ought to say a *community* (*Gemeine*) of saints, that is a community consisting only of saints, or, better still, a *holy community*."\* He thought of the whole number of Christian believers as forming one community (*Gemeine*). This community has the ultimate authority, but for purposes of good order the bishops and priests were selected from and by the whole number to exercise authority in the name of the whole community. "The bishop's consecration (the consecration which the bishop confers) is nothing more than when he instead of the whole congregation selected one person out of the family (the Church), all of whom have equal power, and commanded him to exercise this power for the others."\*\* If episcopal and priest-

---

\*Wace and Buchheim: Luther's Primary Works, p. 103, The Greater Catechism.

\*\*Prof. Dr. Richard Neubauer: Martin Luther, Eine Auswahl aus seinen Schriften in alter Sprachform. Erster Teil, p. 87, An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation.

ly ordination were lost, it could be restored by the authority inherent in this *Gemeine*. "If a little company of pious Christian laymen were taken prisoners and placed in a desert, who had not in their midst a priest consecrated by a bishop, and were to agree on this, namely, to elect one of them, born in wedlock or not, and were to prescribe to him the duty of baptizing, celebrating mass, absolving, and preaching, this man could as truly be a priest as if all the bishops and all the popes consecrated him."\*\*\* "It follows then, that laymen, priests, princes, bishops, and (or) as they say, spiritual and temporal persons, have in truth no other fundamental difference than that of office or function and not that of estate. For they are all of the spiritual estate, truly priests, bishops, and popes, but not of the same spiritual function, just as among priests and monks each one has not the same functions."† Again he says: "Here you will ask, 'If all who are in the Church are priests, by what character are those whom we now call priests to be distinguished from the laity?' I reply, By the use of these words, 'priest,' 'clergy,' 'spiritual person,' 'ecclesiastic,' an injustice has been done, since they have been transferred from the remaining body of Christians to those few who are now, by a hurtful custom, called ecclesiastics. For Holy Scripture makes no distinction between them, except that those who are now boastfully called popes, bishops, and lords, it calls ministers, servants, and stewards, who are to serve the rest in the ministry of the word."\*\* "It was not principalities, powers, and dominions that Christ instituted in His Church, but a ministry."\*\*\*

The will of this community of believers was to be expressed through the general council. Even the Pope, in Luther's opinion, was subject to the council. "The order

\*\*\*Neubauer: Op. cit., pp. 87, 88.

†Idem, p. 88.

\*Wace and Buchheim: Op. cit., p. 269f, Concerning Christian Liberty.

\*\*Wace and Buchheim: Op. cit., p. 366, On the Bab. Cap. of the Church.

of the most holy and renowned Nicene Council must be again restored, namely, that a bishop must be confirmed by the two nearest bishops or by the archbishop. If the Pope cancels the decrees of these and all other councils, what is the good of councils at all? Who has given him the right thus to despise councils, and to cancel them? If this is allowed, we had better abolish all bishops, archbishops and primates, and make simple rectors of all of them, so that they could have the Pope alone over them.”\*\*\* Since the supreme authority rests in the council, the council must be free to meet. Any faithful member of the body of believers must have the right to procure the meeting of a council, if he be able to do so. “Therefore when need requires, and the Pope is a cause of offense to Christendom, in these cases whoever can best do so, as a true member of the whole body, must do what he can that there might be a true free council.”† Discussing Mt. 18:15-17, he says: “Here it is commanded each member to care for the other; much more then ought we to do this, if a public ruling member does the evil, who by his behavior causes great harm and offense to the others. If then I am to accuse him before the Church (*Gemeine*), I must collect the Church together. Moreover, they have no argument from Scripture that the sole power to call and confirm a council belongs to the Pope.”\*

The organization of this visible Catholic Church, this *Gemeine* of believers in Christ, did not concern Luther very deeply. His chief concern was the fellowship between the believer and God. The fellowship between believers could express itself as best suited the genius of each people. If a people desired to retain the episcopal form, they could do so. For example, the Danish Luth-

---

\*\*\*Wace and Buchheim: Op. cit., p. 191, To the Christian Nob. of Ger. Nation.

†Neubauer: Op. cit., p. 95.

\*Neubauer: Op. cit., p. 94.

eran Church remains episcopal to this day.\*\* It was not the desire of Luther and his followers to change the existing external government of the Church. Time had hal- lowed it. He was opposed to change for the sake of change. "If what has been in use, from of old, is to be changed or abolished, an indubitable proof must be given that it is contrary to God's Word. Otherwise, what is not against us is for us."\*\*\* "It is dangerous and terri- ble to hear or believe anything contrary to the unanimous testimony, faith, and doctrine of the entire Holy Christian Church, which, for over fifteen hundred years now, it has unanimously held throughout all the world."† He de- sired to correct abuses that had accumulated but not to change. The Augsburg Confession, the first formal state- ment of the Lutheran position and the official basis of Lutheranism, says: "Now our meaning is not to have rule taken from the Bishops, but this one thing only is requested at their hands, that they would suffer the Gos- pel to be purely taught, and that they would relax a few observances, which can not be held without sin. But if they will remit none, let them look how they will give account to God for this, that by their obstinacy they afford cause of schism."† But if a people should desire to change the existing organization, they must be free to do so. "Where the Gospel is preached and the sacra- ments rightly administered or conferred, there is the Holy Christian Church; nor is it to be fashioned, instructed or bound by institutions, rights or laws, by extrinsics, state, pomp or mode of living, custom or habit, nor by hours or seasons, persons or ceremonies."\*\*

---

\*\*Lindsay: *Op. cit.* I, p. 403.

\*\*\*Against the Anabaptists, 1528, quoted by Jacobs: *Life of Luth- er, Heroes of Reformation Series*, p. 386.

‡Letter to Duke of Prussia, 1532, quoted by Jacobs, p. 386.

†Schaff: *Creeeds of Christendom*, III, p. 72.

\*Luther's Confession, Art. I, sent to Venice by Sanuto, Venetian Ambassador to Germany, May, 1531. Quoted in full by Jacobs, *op. cit.*, pp.436-443.



The "authority of the keys" (Mt. 16:19) Luther interpreted to mean the authority to teach and not to absolve from sin. This authority has been committed to the whole body of believers. Whatever authority bishops and priests exercise in this respect, they exercise as agents of the congregation. "The key of binding and loosing is the authority to teach, and not to absolve." "No one but the Christian Church, *i. e.*, the assembly of all believers in Christ, has this key; of this, there is no doubt. He who appropriates it to himself, be he Pope, or who he may, commits sacrilege." "A pastor exercises the office of the keys, baptizes, preaches, administers the sacrament, and does other offices, whereby he serves the congregation, which has entrusted the keys to him, even though he be a rascal. For if he do this instead of the congregation, the Church does it."‡

The unity of the Church is not found in outward organization, for, as has been noted above, he cared little for special forms of organization, but it is found in the unity of the faith. "The Word and doctrine should effect Christian unity or fellowship; where it is the same and alike, the rest will follow, but where it is not, there is no unity. Speak not to me of love or friendship, where the Word or faith is renounced; for it is not love, but the Word, that brings eternal life, God's grace, and all heavenly treasures."† In the same manner he avoided the contradiction of a "Holy Catholic Church" with members whose lives were unclean. The holiness is a matter of faith. "We are to believe that the Church is holy; we cannot see it. For the Creed says: 'I believe that there is a Holy Christian Church,' it does not say: 'I see a Holy Church.' If you judge according to the outward appearance, you will see that it is sinful and infirm, and has numerous offenses, so that one is inclined to impatience,

---

‡These quotations concerning the power of the keys are taken from various addresses as given by Jacobs, p. 378.

†On Eph. 6:10f, quoted by Jacobs, p. 383.

another to wrath, one has one fault, and another, another. Hence, it is written, not: 'I see,' but: 'I believe there is a Holy Christian Church.'\*\*

Luther believed in the continuity of the Church through the centuries. He did not claim to start something new, but to reassert the old. "We devise nothing new, but hold and abide by the old Word of God as the Ancient Church did; we are, therefore, with the same true Ancient Church, one Church believing and teaching one Word of God."\*\* As in the past, so in the future. The Church will continue because the Holy Spirit has been promised to abide in the believers.

The relations between the civil power and the Church, according to Luther, grow out of his fundamental doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. The Pope has usurped the authority that God entrusted to the civil power. "The powers that be are ordained of God." If the Pope has failed to govern the Church as it ought to be governed, and the civil arm is divinely instituted, who better than the civil authorities can take charge and reorganize the Church? "Therefore, when need requires, and the Pope is a cause of offense to Christendom, in these cases whoever can best do so, as a true member of the whole body, must do what he can that there might be a true free council. This no one can do so well as the temporal power."† In order to restore the ancient canons the civil power must take a hand. The Bishop of Rome has usurped the authority of the other bishops and will not let go unless the civil authority intervenes. "It should be decreed by an imperial law that no episcopal cloak, and no confirmation of any appointment shall for the future be obtained from Rome."†

The relation between the Church and salvation is somewhat confused in Luther's writings. His inheritance

\*On. Gal. 5:9, quoted by Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 385.

\*\*Against Hans Wurst, quoted by Jacobs, *op. cit.* p. 386.

†Neubauer: *Op. cit.*, p. 95.

†Wace and Buchheim: *Op. cit.*, p. 191.

from the Middle Ages of the Church as a saving institution mingled with his own personal experience of salvation by faith and produced this confusion. In his comments on the third article of the Apostles' Creed in his Greater Catechism he seems to teach that salvation is obtained through the Church. "I believe the Holy Spirit makes me holy, according to his name. How can He do this, or by what means can He accomplish this? Answer: Through the Christian Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, and the life everlasting. For in the first place, He has a special community in the world, which is the mother that conceives and bears every Christian by the Word of God, which He reveals and preaches. . . . Where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to form the Christian Church, to call and to gather it together, without which none can come to the Lord Christ."\* That is, the Holy Spirit forms the Christian Church of those who hear and believe the Word of God and through this Christian community so formed saves others that believe. He does not make it clear how those who first formed the Church were saved when there was no Church in existence.

To sum up: Luther taught that the Christian Church is a community of believers in Christ, a holy community which imparts its holiness to its members; this community is self-governing, its united will being expressed through a general council; for the sake of order in the administration of the sacraments, this community can empower certain individuals with the authority to administer them; these individuals may exercise the governing powers also; but when through neglect or misuse of these powers scandal results, the civil governors, by virtue of their being members of the Christian community and priests, may take charge; and against this community the gates of Hades shall never prevail, but it shall continue until the Lord Christ comes again.

\*Wace and Buchheim: *Op. cit.*, p. 102, *On the Creed.*